

Op-Ed Piece, Bangor Daily News, BDN, Dec. 25, 2011

Yoking Conservation and Agriculture

By Walt Whitcomb
and Bill Beardsley

As commissioners of the Maine departments of agriculture and conservation, we have recommended a departmental merger into a new Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. Yes, existing special-interest bureaus, such as the agricultural and forest service, parks and public lands, natural areas and land use regulation, would remain. Yes, economies would be achieved. Yet the primary reason for an ACF department is a belief that the future vitality of Maine, as in the past, is founded in Maine's unique interplay of private lands and public access.

The Maine we know and envision is as iconic as New Zealand or the Rocky Mountain states. We believe a Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry is a positive step.

The two departments have similar missions; both are responsible for protecting natural resources while promoting natural resource-based food and fiber production. With its vast expanses of woodlands and fertile farmland, and our proximity to major population centers, Maine has great potential for responsibly growing its natural resource-based industries. The popularity of fresh, locally grown food, the demand for sustainable forest production, and Maine's internationally recognized outdoor-recreation venues and conservation all have a common denominator, the land.

The combined efforts of a Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry will be better positioned to lead a private-sector, public-sector, non-profit partnership providing technical assistance and strategic planning for wise, long-term resource use and preservation.

We all enjoy Maine's natural environment, public lands and extraordinary places, from traditional outdoor recreation to wilderness experiences to the best sailing west of the Aegean Sea. The Maine we all know is an evolving interplay of nature; Maine people working off the land, Maine people enjoying our quality of life. Related to our agriculture, conservation, outdoor recreation and forestry are our made-in-Maine, values-added products, from Raye's Mustard to L.L.Bean to BIW, our Maine blueberries and potatoes, specialty papers and bio-fuels, Appalachian Mountain Club and Maine Guide wilderness adventures, all tied to our natural resource identity.

The proposed creation of an ACF department reflects the blending of land uses. Cranberries, blueberries, orchards, live stock, and Christmas trees, for example, are all multi-year crops that are not that different from intensive silvicultural practices of tree farms. Land for Maine's Future seeks to preserve fragile ecological places, natural forest landscape, traditional farming, working waterfronts, all reflective of Maine's value for a landscape that uniquely links viable private land use with shared conservation values. Land use planning, whether guided by Maine's Growth Management Act in organized towns, or LURC statutes in unorganized towns, our 1 million acres of public lands, our oversight of conservation easements on millions of acres of private

lands, our tens of thousands of snowmobile, ATV, hiking and biking and kayaking corridors and trails, all interface in an ACF department.

A department merger will provide increased benefits to Maine agriculture. One of the more frequent, unmet requests from agricultural producers is in product promotion. Another is for technical assistance with the regulatory requirements. Both agencies have limited staff members who find it necessary to cover the whole state. Providing land owner advice and assistance, when viewed in the bigger picture of managing the land for greatest long-term value, can be a win-win for the forestland owner and the farmer and a more efficient use of state dollars. Staff members who are cross-trained to provide several types of assistance can be especially valuable to the customer.

Integrating better forest practices into land management planning for smaller farmers and woodlot owners will generate value that can help forestall conversion to non-productive development. Managing park lands for optimum public value encompasses many of the same land use needs as agricultural and forest land. Erosion control, proper placement of access and wise ground-cover management are examples of similar threads of expertise requirements.

For constituencies that seek assurance that conservation, recreation, forestry, agricultural and land use regulatory interests will each remain robust, the merger plans do not propose elimination of any of these existing bureaus and divisions. The Milk Commission, Harness Racing Commission, Allagash Wilderness Waterway, all the special programs, will be as strong as ever. By working together in one department, we believe we can and should strengthen the shared ties that bind.

Gov. LePage has challenged us to pursue strategies that respect private ownership of land, that create a business and jobs climate in which all Mainers have an opportunity to earn a good living, a good return on investment in a global economy, a place where our natural environment is protected by easements and streamlined regulations that are tough, predictable, timely and fair, where we strive for a vibrant 21st century multiple-use, multiple-practices, natural-resource economy and quality of place that defines Maine as a special and unique place.

We believe the creation of this new department yokes our public and private lands, our farms and forest, our recreation and conservation values in an ideal relationship. A new ACF department will be the best mixing of kindred needs and interests.

Walt Whitcomb is commissioner of the Maine Department of Agriculture. Bill Beardsley is commissioner of the Maine Department of Conservation.

####